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<b>Author</b>	Professor Anthony Elliott
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**The New Individualist Perspective: Identity  
Transformations in the Aftermath of the Global Financial  
Crisis**

*Professor Anthony Elliott  
Chair of Sociology  
Flinders University  
Australia*

*and*

*Visiting Research Professor  
Department of Sociology  
Open University  
United Kingdom*

*And*

*Visiting Professor  
Department of Sociology  
University College Dublin  
Ireland*

In this article I examine some implications of the extraordinary financial and economic crisis sweeping the globe since 2008 – referred to in what follows as the Great Global Crash – with specific reference to the social theory of the new individualism (Elliott and Lemert, 2006, 2009a, 2009b; Elliott 2008, 2009; Elliott and Urry 2010; Elliott, Katagiri and Sawai 2010).<sup>1</sup> The global shocks to worldwide production, financial, consumption and real estate systems unleashed by the crisis of September 2008 has carried profound consequences for economic and social development, both in terms of extensity and intensity, as well as significant implications for global security and political stability. As an indication of the global scope and depth of the macroeconomic financial crisis of 2008, the United Nations (2009) – in a report titled “World Economic Situation and Prospects 2009” – estimated that governments worldwide have spent in economic stimulus packages in excess of \$US18 trillion in order to recapitalize banks and failing financial institutions; it was also estimated by the UN that \$US2.6 trillion has been spent worldwide in fiscal stimulus packages, and that worldwide unemployment as a direct result of the financial and economic crisis might reach fifty million jobs (although the report also notes that such a figure could well double). Widely viewed as the worst world recession since the Second World War, the global policy response to the economic and financial crisis of 2008 – centred on monetary, fiscal and financial measures to stabilize financial markets and revive the global electronic economy – has sought to introduce sounder economic management and better policy regulation of the financial sector in order to achieve more sustainable economic goals for the twenty-

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first century. Some critics have labelled such policy responses as spelling the death of neo-liberalism, or the demise of unfettered, turbo-charged economic globalization. As a consequence, the new individualism – as a construct of identity modes underpinning the global electronic economy of mass consumerism, mass indebtedness and neo-liberalism more generally – has come in for some sustained and probing criticism (see, among others, Smith 2007 and Beasley 2009). However I shall argue in this article that, rather than heralding a new era of austerity or significant cultural reform of the global electronic economy and its associated fast-speed ways of life throughout the expensive, polished cities of the West, that the global financial crisis has ultimately produced a reinforcement and intensification of the ethos of new individualism. The upshot, in sociological terms, has been a lifting of the new individualism to the second power.

### **The Theory of The New Individualism**

The new individualism, as originally formulated (Elliott and Lemert 2006, 2009a, 2009b), comprises four core dimensions: a relentless emphasis on *self-reinvention*; an endless hunger for *instant change*; a fascination with *speed*, *dynamism* and *acceleration*; and a preoccupation with *short-termism* and *episodicity*. The argument, broadly speaking, is that the new individualism can be deciphered from the culture in which people live their lives today – especially (but not only) those living in the polished, expensive cities of the West. Corporate networking, short-term project work, organizational downsizing, self-help manuals, compulsive consumerism, cybersex, instant identity makeovers and therapy culture: these are just some of the

core features of global individualist culture, and the argument was developed in *The New Individualism* that immersion in such a world carries profound emotional consequences for peoples' private and public lives.

To speak of a “new individualism” invites the query of what, exactly, is “new” in the creed of individualism? It also raises the thorny question of how might a “new individualism” be compared and contrasted with what went before – that is, an older or traditional form of individualism? The term “individualism” was coined by Alexis de Tocqueville in the early nineteenth century to describe an emerging sense of social isolation in American society. A denial of social connection, the individualist creed was premised on the assumption that people should leave it to others to deal with their own problems and to get on with the living of life on their own terms. In his classic *Democracy in America* (1834), de Tocqueville wrote of individualism as a “mature and calm feeling.” This was, in effect, an image of the bourgeois gentleman retreating to his library in order to retreat on the self – with the aim of returning, in time, to civil society with renewed energy for the affairs of state. My suggestion, however, is that to speak of individualism as a “mature and calm feeling” is a fundamental clue as to how far the world has travelled since 1834. Certainly evidence suggests that individualism is alive and well; indeed, the individualist impulse thrives, albeit as individualism suitably modified and adjusted to fit high-speed digital communication innovations and multinational financial transactions spawned by globalisation. This version of individualism – the “new individualism” of 21<sup>st</sup> century societies – is however far removed from a “mature and calm feeling”. On the contrary, new individualism thrives on “feelings of panic” (Elliott 2009).

Ours is the era, I contend, of a new individualism driven and over-determined by continual self-reinvention, instant change, speed and short-termism. *Self-reinvention*, or at least the fantasy of such reinvented lives, is essential to new individualisms. Our current fascination for the instant making, reinvention and transformation of selves is, in some sense or another, integral to contemporary living. Living in the global age of a new individualism requires individuals capable of designing and directing their own biographies, of defining identities in terms of self-actualisation and of deploying social goods and cultural symbols to represent individual expression and personality. In current social circumstances - in which our lives are reshaped by technology-induced globalization and the transformation of capitalism - it is not the particular individuality of an individual that's most important. What's increasingly significant is how individuals create identities, the cultural forms through which people symbolize individual expression and desire, and perhaps above all the speed with which identities can be reinvented and instantly transformed. It is this stress on instant transformation – and in particular the fears and anxieties it is designed to displace or lessen – that distinguishes the theory of the new individualism from notions such as reflexive modernization and individualization in current social science literature.

The twenty-first century craze to constantly crave reinvention is fast becoming foundational to contemporary living, and oftentimes involves a 'tipping point' into addictions, obsessions, compulsions. Today this is nowhere more evident than in the pressure consumerism puts on us to "transform" and "improve" every aspect of ourselves: not just our homes and gardens but our careers, our food, our clothes, our sex lives, our faces, minds and bodies. In our quick-fix society, people want change

and, increasingly, they want it instantly. There are various market-directed solutions that now offer the promise of instant transformation. More and more, such market-directed solutions – from self-help to therapy culture, from instant identity makeovers to plastic surgery – are reduced to a purchase mentality. There is an emerging generation of people whom might be called the “Instant Generation” and who treat individualism as on a par with shopping: consumed fast and with immediate results. Today’s ‘want-now’ consumerism promotes a fantasy of the self’s infinite plasticity. The message from the makeover industry is that there’s nothing to stop you reinventing yourself however you choose. But your redesigned sense of individualism is unlikely to make you happy for long. For identity enhancements are only fashioned with the short-term in mind. They are until “next time” (Elliott 2008). This relentless emphasis on self-reinvention thus equates to a culture of ‘next-ness’.

The new individualism is driven also by an endless hunger for *instant change*. This individualist trend is evident all around us, not only in the rise of plastic surgery and the instant identity make-overs of reality TV but also in compulsive consumerism, speed dating and therapy culture. In a world that places a premium on instant gratification, the desire for immediate results has never been as pervasive or acute. We have become accustomed to emailing others across the planet in seconds, buying flashy consumer goods with the click of a mouse, and drifting in and out of relations with others without long-term commitments. Is it any wonder that we now have different expectations about life’s possibilities and the potential for change?

New individualist ideologies also accord a salutary sublimity to *speed*. This is an ever-accelerating, restlessly dynamic form of life, and one that is perpetually in

peril for not moving swiftly enough. Paul Virilio's slogan that we live in a time with no delays might, on this reckoning, be read less as descriptive and instead as prescriptive: whole ways of life, as well as the 'rational calculations' of organizations and senior management boards, are devoted to a dream of speed in and through which lives become squeezed, rushed, hurried and harried. Our accelerated lives of new individualism fit hand in glove with the high-speed flows of consumerism and cosmopolitan, jet-set culture. In the case of individualist speed, as opposed to the 'pure speed' of the global electronic economy, this fascination takes the form of continual transgression, traumatism, seduction and excess. Speed is among other things a means of negotiating modernity's multiplication of choice.

Finally, the new individualism is shaped in and through a preoccupation with *short-termism* and *episodicity*. In this connection, there are important new links between the advent of the global electronic economy and soci-economic logics of intensive globalism on the one hand, and the popular explosion of interest in reinvention or makeover industries and short-term identity reconstruction on the other. Let me briefly explain these new links. The impact of multinational corporations, able to export industrial production to low-wage spots around the globe, and to restructure investment in the West away from manufacture to the finance, service and communications sectors, has spelt major changes in the ways people live their lives, how they approach work, as well as how they position themselves within the employment marketplace. Whilst employment has become much more complex than in previous periods as a result of the acceleration of globalization, one key institutional fact redefining the contemporary condition has been the rapid decline of life-time employment. The end of a job-for-life, or of a career developed within a



single organization, has been interpreted by some critics as heralding the arrival of a “new economy” – flexible, mobile, networked. Global financier and philanthropist George Soros argues that ‘transactions’ now substitute for ‘relationships’ in the modern economy.

If the new individualism has advantages as well as limitations, functioning as both curse as well as blessing, this is because it is intricately intertwined with the global electronic economy. The triumph of globalization is that it not only operates on a horizontal axis, universalizing the operations of multinational capital and new digital technologies across the globe; it operates also, and fundamentally, on a vertical axis, reorganizing subjectivity and pressing the ethos of new individualism into its service. This now brings me to the debate over globalization, both in sociology and in public political discourse, which I will turn to discuss briefly in the next section.

### **The Globalization Debate**

In the last ten to fifteen years, the term 'globalization' has fast become a central organizing category in academic disciplines from economics to international relations, from cultural studies to sociology. Some argue that the globalization debate is maddeningly abstract, with all its talk of "borderless worlds", "turbo capitalism" and "transgovernmental networks". Others contend that globalization is now invoked to describe so many things - from the spread of AIDS to the war on terrorism - that it is in danger of losing all meaning. One of the amazing facts about globalization, though rarely commented upon, is just how quickly it has come to dominate academic and

public debate. Fifteen or so years ago, the preferred terms for analysing worldwide change were those of 'internationalism' or 'internationalisation'. Talk of the global didn't much figure. Today, by contrast, and in that relatively short period of time, the term 'globalization' has pretty much gone global. The term is now everywhere - in the newspapers, business magazines, radio and television, and throughout our universities.

The notion of globalization, many agree, captures something about the ways the world in which we live is now continuously changing. Hence, the preoccupation in globalization theory with, amongst others, forces of multilayered political governance, shifting patterns of post-industrial production, global financial flows and exchange rates. Each of these clusters is a subject of intense debate in academic circles, and it is telling that such debates are played out globally or at least throughout the contemporary West, in universities and government think-tanks from San Francisco to Sydney. Yet globalization as a concept involves considerably more than academic debate alone. It refers not only to the globalized protest strategies of antiglobalizers in Seattle, Genoa, Porto Alegre and elsewhere but also the myriad ways in which the forces of globalism impact upon both the personal and social aspects of everyday life. Today, there is good reason to think that the world really has changed, and profoundly. For anyone wanting to understand these changes, it is necessary to get to grips with what globalization is, with what it is doing to our societies, and with the profound consequences it carries for personal and emotional life.

When social analysts first started to speak of the globalizing implications of modernity – what might be termed the Globalization I debate - many reacted in a sceptical manner. The thesis that the historical and economic processes of the modern age mark an overall movement towards "one world", even though the proponents of globalization never quite expressed it thus, was considered fatally flawed - not only by academics but by policy analysts and politicians. The sceptics were, in short, unconvinced, and sighted trade and investment figures from the late nineteenth century to question the idea that national economic interdependence had entered an historically unprecedented stage in the late twentieth century. Critics of the “myth of globalization” pointed out that, in contrast to the colonizing spirit of the age of world empires, the majority of economic activity across the international economy occurred primarily in the OECD countries. Regionalization rather than globalization, it was said, defined the shape of the worldwide economy. Some went so far as to claim that, because of the heavy regionalization of such trading blocs as the European Union and North America, the world economy was becoming less, not more, global. Most agreed, at any rate, that nation-states were not becoming progressively less sovereign - on the contrary, internationalisation was regarded as fundamentally dependant on the regulatory control of national governments.

Alongside the sceptics of globalization were to be found the antiglobalizers. The antiglobalization brigade, in all its manifestations from anti-capitalist protesters to policy think-tanks, put forward a list of powerful charges cataloguing the sins of globalization. Globalism was allegedly empowering multinational corporations and speculative finance, compounding inequality and eroding democracy, promoting Western imperialism and the Americanization of the world, destroying environmental

standards, as well as brutalizing the public sphere and the state governmental structures through which it operates. The emergence of a planetary scale global market with ever decreasing tariffs, ever greater international production, as well as more integrated financial markets with higher trade flows, had unleashed a turbo-charged capitalism of unprecedented forms of economic exploitation and political oppression. Or so argued the antiglobalizers.

The antiglobalizer's link between global Westernization or Americanization on the one hand and turbo-capitalist exploitation on the other is an interesting one. Somewhere behind it lurks the Marxist conviction that capitalism exhibits a pathological expansionist logic, one which now expands the geographical reach of Western corporations and markets to the nth degree. The imperial West, it is argued, has carved up and redivided the world into exclusive trade, investment and financial sectors and flows, with new institutions – such as the G8 and World Bank – exercising global surveillance and domination. Yet significantly there is no recognition here of the monolithic, unitary and ultimately all-controlling logic attributed to globalization processes; rather, the antiglobalizers tended towards the flat-footed platitude that globalism was a total system with only negative impacts – from which the discrepancy between the economic processes of globalization and the daily experience of globalism could only appear as unbridgeable. Certainly it is hard to see how the antiglobalizers can justify the grounds of their own social critique on the basis of the fatalistic theory they espouse. In any event, the assumption that the globe is always geared to perfectly integrated markets is certainly deficient. That is, such critics have reductively equated globalism with an economistic version of globalization. Yet, as we will see, concentrating solely on processes of economic integration, and thus

neglecting current social, cultural and political transformations, leads to an impoverished understanding of how globalization is constituted, contested and shaped.

One of the most sophisticated analysts of globalization is David Held, who has tackled head-on the critics, both sceptics and antiglobalizers. Held, a professor at the London School of Economics, has quickly emerged as a leading global expert on globalization. He powerfully argues (1999, 2002, 2004) that the critics are wrong on almost all the major points. Globalization as the driver of Americanization? Yes, the US is the major player in shaping economic markets, but globalization says Held is not just an American phenomenon. As he points out, American companies account for around only one-fifth of world total imports, and approximately one-quarter of total exports. The compounding of inequalities? Individual income differences in the wealthiest and poorest countries are greater than ever, but perhaps the most significant development is that those living in the very poorest conditions appear to be on the decline worldwide. Global markets triumphant over national governments? In the West, government expenditure and taxation levels have generally risen. Globalization, says Held, has not simply eroded the power of states; rather it has reconfigured it. The globalizing of communications threatening national cultures? The diffusion of instant communication across large parts of the world cannot be doubted, but Held argues that available evidence indicates local and national cultures remain robust.

Over the last ten to fifteen years, whilst the Globalization I debate raged, few could have anticipated just how quickly the spread of a "borderless" world was to

occur. Some consider that the acceleration and deepening of worldwide interconnectedness sprang directly from the collapse of Soviet communism and the end of the Cold War. Some see the rise of universal consumerism as responsible. Others identify new information technologies as crucial. Whatever the exact play of forces, it is increasingly evident that globalism is nowadays not only catching up with the discourse of globalization but is, in various senses, outstripping it. That is, cultural transformations associated with globalism have called into question many of the economic assumptions informing mainstream accounts of globalization.

There can be little doubt that the debate over globalization in recent years – described here as the Globalization II debate – has advanced a much richer, multidimensional framework for analysing the shape of world affairs today. “Risk society” (Beck), “network society” (Castells), “liquid modernity” (Bauman), “reflexive modernity” (Giddens): these are just some of the images of our globalized world which have emanated from recent social theory and public political debate in more recent years. In an age of the satellite and instantaneous digital communications, there are then fewer and fewer social analysts that approach globalization in only economic terms. Notwithstanding this, however, it is necessary to enter some judicious qualifications. Much social science and newspaper commentary the world over, for instance, tends to assume that globalization refers only to marketization and integrated financial markets. Yet, to repeat, it is increasingly evident that - in both the academy and public political debate - the impacts of globalization are no longer viewed as limited to economic actions and decisions alone, and that various cultural, social and political aspects of daily life are seen as inextricably caught up with the forces of globalism.

The globalization of communication media is especially consequential in this regard. For if globalization is about, among other things, the emergence of one-worldism, then perhaps nowhere is this better dramatised than in popular understandings of the social impact of communication technologies and the growth of the media industries. A key reference point here is the early 1970s, when the first telecommunications satellites were positioned in geosynchronous orbits, thus allowing for the emergence of virtually instantaneous electronic communication between individuals, institutions, societies and cultures. From the perspective of daily life in the West, the integration of satellites into telecommunications networks is a taken-for-granted phenomenon, an operational backdrop which allows individuals to use mobile phones, faxes, email and related Internet services the world over. Yet the expansion of global markets is fundamentally interwoven with the spread of such technologies – the scope of which is truly staggering. The activities of 24 hour money markets, for example, is constituted and reproduced through global networks of communications – producing a daily turnover in 2003 that exceeded \$1.2 trillion.

Another stage of the debate over globalism – what I shall term Globalization III – erupted in late 2006. The reader might think this date arbitrary, but it is selected since this is when an important scholarly article was published, one that was subsequently reported by various media agencies throughout the world. For in late 2006 Princeton economist Gene Grossman spelled out, as transforming and universalising, a new stage of globalization, one which centres on the virtually instant transfer of service jobs to low wage economies. Grossman's argument takes its cue from the West's outsourcing of manufacturing, which soared during the late 1980s and

1990s; such outsourcing, he argues, has been transformed today into an apparently unstoppable societal dynamic. The outsourcing of industrial production over recent decades, says Grossman, finds its counterpart today in the outsourcing of knowledge-intensive jobs. He calls this “global electronic offshoring”, which he argues is fast changing our ways of living and working – and will continue to do so in dramatic ways over the coming years. Electronic offshoring for Grossman refers to more than the rise of call centres in countries such as India. For any service job can be electronically outsourced if it involves substantial reliance upon information technology and involves little face-to-face interaction. And this is the really dramatic part of Grossman’s research: he estimates that somewhere between 30 and 40 million service jobs in the US will become open to electronic offshoring in the near future.

Grossman’s thesis spells major change not only for the US but more broadly for the global North. Workers throughout the service sectors of the expensive cites of the West, as with manufacturing some decades previously, will be exposed to intense competition from overseas as never before. And not just unskilled or semi-skilled workers are at risk. The highly skilled and highly educated – working in finance, legal, medical and hi-tech sectors – will come under increased competition from overseas workers. This, he suggests, will carry profoundly traumatic consequences for individual identities and local communities, especially as regards the provision of economic and emotional support for the many whose livelihoods are threatened. Where does this leave people in terms of their work? Consigned to the spectre of uselessness? Not necessarily, says Grossman. For one thing, retraining and redeployment are now key offshoots of many large-scale organizational retrenchments. Moreover, offshoring to date has only affected a small proportion of



jobs in the advanced economies, and so it's not possible to say with any degree of confidence how the global job-market will develop in the future. But whilst this may be reassuring in one sense, it clearly isn't in another. How could anyone now believe, say, in the long-term management of companies or organizations, or for that matter in long-term careers, after reading Grossman. Dilemmas and quandaries are now the plight of contemporary women and men seeking to sketch out a basically safe psychological platform when moving job to job, contract to contract, network to network. But in our fast globalizing electronic economy, the more astute accept that short-term jobs, contracts and networks are the new realities. What matters is flexibility – the plastic, reshaped sense of self which new forms of work in the global economy at once produce and demand. Thus the typical modern dilemma: how to be flexible enough to survive high levels of personal and cultural drift without being left drained of identity?

### **Frenetic Life after the Global Financial Crisis: R.I.P New Individualism?**

As it happens, the world did not have to wait to see whether Grossman's diagnosis was correct. The eruption of the global financial crisis in September 2008, which bubbled up from the sub-prime mortgage crisis that spread across the United States and then worldwide in late 2007 and early 2008, witnessed widespread economic downturn, massive lay-offs, major exchange-rate volatility and a collapse in world gross product. The global spread of the recession was influenced by many national, regional and international developments, of which only some of the key factors are noted here. Toxic assets; crippled bank balance sheets; the implosion of share

markets; the collapse of some of the biggest names on Wall Street, such as Lehman Brothers; the big freeze on credit; the disintegration of various national financial budgets, such as the Icelandic economy; and, the worldwide shrinking of consumer confidence and employment – these are just some of the elements which produced the worst recession since the Second World War. Add all this to the still reverberating political shocks of 9/11, and it is evident just how quickly the world appeared to change following September 2008.

The global policy response to this crisis, as noted, centred on monetary, fiscal and financial measures to stabilize financial markets and revive the global economic economy. Against the backdrop of mounting balance of payments problems of many emerging economics and other developing countries, the developed industrial countries and various networks of global governance such as the European Union pressed on with the urgent task of unveiling economic stimulus packages as well as fiscal stimulus measures. Yet where the large bulk of policy attention was devoted concerned reforms of the international financial system. Calls for strengthened regulation and supervision of the global money markets, which had fostered massive asset price bubbles and unleashed huge market risks through hedge funds and cross-border financial flows, were made. Other calls were made for a radical reduction in the ‘fat-cat’ salaries of senior executives and investment bankers, especially the payment of astronomical city bonuses. Still further, there were calls for new forms of global economic governance, with a macroprudential regulatory system which would provide “counter-cyclical capital provisioning” in order to minimize global economic shocks and the systemic risks of increasing financialization (see UN, 2009: 16).

Now it might be supposed that the implosion of worldwide share markets – itself the result of freewheeling lending, trading and deregulation that produced colossal losses that devastated the banking system and brought the global economy to its knees – would have produced an ‘institutional pause’, indeed a moment of organizational reflection, as regards corporate culture and its high speed framing of ‘careers’. It might be imagined that, with the global economy in freefall, looking at public and business attitudes towards the culture of work in winner-takes-all corporate capitalism could have proved beneficial – to the beleaguered individuals caught up in the 24/7 worlds of finance and banking and the wider society. Yet, on the contrary, the global economic crisis only served to stimulate an intensification of the ethos of corporate capitalism and ideologies of new individualism. Consider, for example, a front-page expose carried in International Herald Tribune reviewing corporate high-flyers who had failed to move on since the crash. Tom Ollquist, a former employee of Lehman Brothers, was one of those profiled. Journalists Louise Story and Landon Thomas Jr. highlighted that Ollquist had with Lehman “a good job – one that, if it did not make him rich by the gilded standards of Wall Street, still enabled him to buy the nicest house on his block in Hempstead, New York. His job also made him a member of a Lehman unit whose handiwork helped lead to the demise of the bank he loved and to an economic unravelling worldwide” (2009: 1). And how the mighty have fallen: after losing his job at Lehman, Story and Thomas point out, Ollquist has gone to work selling bonds at a small firm. As they condescendingly write, “he now spends his days making cold calls and peddling bonds for a firm that few have ever heard of”. The message throughout the article is that Ollquist and many fellow Lehman travellers were too slow to get out of the downward spiralling market. Story and Thomas conclude their article by contrasting Ollquist’s demise with the shrewd, fast-

paced thinking of another former employee who bet against Lehman's stock and reaped huge rewards.

Contemporary society, observed the late Cornelius Castoriadis, has stopped questioning itself. Lack of genuine questioning – at once a questioning of self and society – is fundamental to the political deadlocks of contemporary social life. Indeed, the political, cultural and economic responses to the Great Crash would similarly suggest just such a lack of reflective self-interrogation as to the conditions of social life. I refer not of course to the grand pronouncements of politicians and policy-makers demanding “urgent reforms”, at either the local, national or regional levels; rather, and as the world navigates the financial misadventures of credit markets, debt markets, equity markets, derivative markets and property markets, what we see is a lack of reflective questioning or critical self-interrogation as to the what the global economic crash means for our lives and especially our lives in these troubled times.

In the so-called ‘recovery’ from the great global crash, notions of ‘rebuilding’, ‘reframing’, ‘consolidation’ and ‘upward trends’ have been used to foreclose the possibility of critical self-reflection upon structural factors at work in the evaporation of capital in the financial system due to massive credit losses as well as any critical interrogation of the dynamics of the global electronic economy itself. In this sense, the foreclosure has something like the function of ‘repression’ in Freudian psychoanalysis, and my conjecture is that it reflects a strengthening and intensification of the affective textures of new individualism. On this approach, the reason why people keep behaving in the mode of new individualists is that – in very

general terms - global structural forces prevent them from acting otherwise; and it is because of an intensification of new individualist ideologies in the face of global economic failure – an intensification that brings to mind Freud’s reflections on guilt and the process by which the superego inflicts sharp rebukes on the conscious self, thereby raising the repressive demands of superego-driven desire to the second power – that new life-strategies have recently emerged to deal with these traumas. There are, I contend, three emergent such strategies in and through which the new individualism continues to expand its cultural logics at the level of identities, organizations, institutions and social interactions. These are (1) *engagement through detachment*; (2) *responsibility-floating*; and (3) *speed of movement or mobilities*. Let me turn briefly to sketch out what these new individualist life-strategies comprise.

First, my argument is that life in the fast lane of the new individualism – of continual change, ongoing reinvention, short-termism and episodicity - requires a sense of *detached engagement*. Such engagement through disengagement ranges from ‘dropping in’ to organizational discussions through email whilst working abroad to the monitoring of professional contacts in thick networks. It is also evident that the prospects for the detached engagement of individualized actors increases the higher one is within an organization or firm. At the top, crisis is normalized and change ever-present, and so shifting from one network to another network with speed and agility becomes central to professional and personal success. Knowing how to move in the networked world, perhaps even more so than the acquisition of specific technical skills themselves, is fundamental to what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello call “the new spirit of capitalism”. As Boltanski and Chiapello summarize this ethos, the global business elite are “putting an accent on polyvalence, on flexibility of

employment, on the ability to learn and to adapt to new functions rather than on the possession of skills and acquired qualification, on the capacity to gain trust, to communicate, to ‘relate’”. We should perhaps note that the inverted comma here around ‘relate’ does not, in our view, indicate a lack of expenditure of emotional energy invested in work and professional networking. On the contrary, and as many of the stories we recount in this book underline, many new individualists feel themselves to be taxed to their limit in terms of their daily communications and relationships with colleagues. But the point is that less and less often in today’s fast-paced mobile world does the growing speed of networked communications lead many new individualists to ‘open themselves up’ to others or, for that matter, to themselves. From one angle, this is hardly surprising. Living in networked time means being continually on the move, both physically and emotionally.

Second, abetted by various economic forces including financial deregulation, new individualists turn towards *floating* both their organizational responsibilities and their control over subordinates within firms. By floating, we mean to stress the collapse of managerially structured executive routines, as well as of the mentality of long-term “careers”. To say that mobile-driven organizations promote this floating orientation is to say that, like all obsolescent paradigms, the ‘scientific’ approach to management which dominated the advanced societies during the late twentieth century – involving the continuous presence of executives and ongoing surveillance of employees – has become a formidable barrier to progress in the early twenty-first century. By contrast, and strikingly, the new approach to management involves a kind of non-management. The French economist Daniel Cohen says of today’s global business elite: “there are no more white collars who give orders to blue collars – there

are only collars of mixed colours who confront the task they have to resolve”. And the task to be resolved, we might add, is more often than not an episodic project – each of which creates further opportunities for networking as well as the likely improvement in opportunities for employment elsewhere or further promotion. This is why floating is both network-driven and self-interested. In a world of short-term, fast-changing projects, it is not so much narcissism which comes to the fore (as was supposed by critics like Richard Sennett and Christopher Lasch in the 1980s) but the always-switched-on, 24/7 commitment to living one’s professional identity – even if this means disengagement from family and friends, and even disengagement from the self within.

Third, new individualists define their identities increasingly through the intensity and extensity of their mobilities – especially its *speed*. New individualists are, from this angle, technicians of speed – always on the move, ready to travel at a moment’s notice, adept at navigating the corporate sensation of speed and global shift of movement. Multi-tasking across space and time is part of this; but another part is thinking and acting in instant-response mode – as the next corporate directive arrives by email, text, fax. “Speed of movement”, writes Zygmunt Bauman, “has become today a major, perhaps the paramount factor in social stratification and the hierarchy of domination”. The new individualist’s speed of movement is necessary to ‘keep up’ with the networking, deal-making and swirl of market forces today. As Bauman explains it:

Capital travels light with no more than cabin luggage – a briefcase, laptop computer and cellular telephone. That new quality of volatility has made the

engagement redundant and unwise at the same time: if entered it would cramp movement and thus become a constraint on competitiveness and limit the chances of increased productivity. . . . [B]eing free of awkward bonds, cumbersome commitments and dependencies holding back movement was always an effective and favourite weapon of domination; but the supplies of that weapon and the capacities to use them are nowadays doled out less evenly than ever before in modern history.

Individualist escape performances are central to the dramas of new individualism.

A graphic illustration of these three new individualist currents – *detached engagement, floating* and *speed* – can be found in the ways in which corporations and organizations are seeking to reposition themselves – their products, people and brands – in the light of the 2009 Crash. Consider, for example, Ram Charan’s recent bestseller, *Leadership in the Era of Economic Uncertainty*. Charan, a leading management guru, argues that decision-makers must grasp the need to trim, cut and downsize their organizations in order to survive the new global competition. This is not simply the ‘downsize mantra’ of the neo-liberal era; rather, in Charan’s eyes, it requires CEOs and executive managers to trim operations – focusing in particular on a smaller number of product lines – in order to protect the cash efficiency of their companies. “Shrinking will present opportunities”, writes Charan, “to simplify your processes and reduce the layers of management. . . In the end you will have fewer customers, fewer products, fewer facilities, fewer people, fewer suppliers – and a stronger company”. Charan’s strategy of ‘shrinkage’ dovetails perfectly with the ethos of new individualism, and arguably represents a lifting of hyper-individualizing



ideologies to the second power. The irony, of course, is that this new individualist creed is also a public fetish, one in which the impulse to be leaner, trimmer, faster and speedier lies incongruously cheek by jowl with a robotic blank on possible collective futures for society and politics, let alone socially responsible economic growth and development.

These are the emerging new paths of new individualism, and of new individualist dispositions in the global electronic economy, as we move into the 2010s and beyond.

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